

Mr. Chairman, Members for the record Jeff Laszloffy,
President of the Montana Family Foundation.

First I'd like to thank Senator Lewis for carrying this bill and I'd like to make an observation. Ten years ago, when I was a member of this body, school reform bills were always carried by someone from the far right of the republican caucus. Things are changing. A tsunami is sweeping across this nation. Now, when I go to education reform conferences in other states... there are as many democrat legislators there as there are republicans. People on both sides of the aisle see the need for options because we have what can properly be described as a crisis in education, and it extends to Montana as well.

You see, public schools in Montana work very well for a large number of students, but not for all of them.

And those students for whom the public schools do not work need options. Senate Bill 282 is a small but important step in providing an option. I know the term crisis seems alarmist... but I think when we look at the numbers it rises to that level. Last year when this bill came before this body, we said we have an average 20% drop out rate... and no one believed us. This session, that figure has become the talk of the legislature and OPI. In the interim, we looked even deeper into the numbers and now we're focused on the remediation rate. The number of students who graduate from Montana high schools and go on to Montana colleges and universities and have to take remedial classes to catch-up before they can begin their normal course of study. Statewide, the average remediation rate is 30%. 30%. And in some counties

it's higher. In Yellowstone County it's 40%. Couple this with the 20% dropout figure and I think it rises to the level of a crisis. If we had numbers this bad in a private business or a private school it would be an all-hands-on-deck-moment. Why are we not shouting this from the rooftops? Why are we still pretending that we can fix the problem with the same old worn-out solutions? Why is it so hard for us to take models that are working well in other states, and simply implement them here in Montana? The people who will speak against this bill are the people who control the system. The same system that's producing the numbers that I just described. While Montana lags... other states are moving ahead with innovation. Why can't we piggy-back on their success?

We'll have people who say this is unconstitutional, as if constitutionality is an acceptable excuse for mediocrity. We have an expert witness who will address the constitutional question. We have people who say tax credits are bad tax policy. This tax credit literally saves the state and taxpayers millions of dollars. Is it possible that this will turn the educational establishment on its ear? Absolutely not. What it will do is keep a few students in school who might otherwise dropout. It's small enough to be considered an experiment. In fact when it's fully implemented, the number of students participating will be smaller than the number of students who drop-out of Montana high schools each year. And the fiscal impact? Less than one half of one percent of the total education budget.

Members, over the years we've spent a lot of time focused on education from the adult side of the equation and that's important. We need to do right by our teachers, and the administrators, but in light of the numbers I just gave you, can we agree that it's time to start focusing on the kids? Montana is one of only eight remaining states in the entire nation with no school choice. Sure the other side will argue we have private schools and homeschools, but those are only available to kids whose parents have money. What about kids from disadvantaged homes? Don't they deserve a chance? This is a small step but the concept is working in other states and it can work here too. 20% drop-out rates and 30% remediation rates are just too high. Kids need options. Please vote yes. Thank you.